
Xmas Carol

by Steven Spruill

Major Rapp stared into fire. Slowly he became aware of the weight of the tumbler steadied on his right thigh. His fingers curved around the glass without feeling. He looked down at the tumbler with sour amusement. It was a painfully tacky thing, handed out by Wards a few seasons ago "free with your purchase of 10 dollars or more." It was appliqued with a Christmas tree, three presents beneath, and an amorphous angel there on top.

Rapp raised the glass to his mouth. The Laphroaig burned down his throat, settling in his stomach with the weight and heat of a tiny sun. He waited, keeping the glass at eye level, until the warm rays began to spread through him. That was better. Starting to get a little cold, there.

He looked through the glass at the fire, then set it down, unnerved by the image of the tree going up in flames. I should have gotten a tree, he thought. But then again, what's the point? Edward and Barb and the kids won't make it this year. What about Joey? It would be great to see "Brat." On the other hand, it might be depressing. Rapp imagined the line of patter. *Hey, big brother, when you gonna drop this army stuff and get hitched? Am I going to beat you to the altar too?*

Or maybe Joe would bring his latest girl-

friend. That would keep him quiet about marriage. Good old Joey, always with someone, never alone. Rapp felt a surge of affection. Good for you, Brat. Good for you. *You get married. Give me some more nieces, or maybe some nephews.*

Suddenly Rapp felt almost desolate. He sipped more of the scotch and hitched his chair closer to the fire. The soles of his boots started to heat up, then the knees of his pants. The heat triggered a memory of 'Nam, of sitting out in the elephant grass waiting for action. If you squatted down there in the sun too long without moving, the material of your fatigues would begin to scorch where it stretched tight over your knees.

Bodies spoiled fast in that heat . . .

Rapp groaned and pressed back into his chair. He looked around the room, frantic for a distraction, but it was too late. Behind the glassy, blurred surface of his eyes, he saw the row of bodies his men had pulled out of the tunnel that time outside Dak To. Bonelessly limp. Caked with dust and blood. S'posed to be Viet Cong. Couple of grandmothers, bunch of kids. Men too, yes, don't be so hard on yourself. Probably *were* Cong. Somebody gunned down eight of your men from that copse of trees. They either vanished into the tunnel or thin air.

Grandmothers.

And eight good men.

Who said he didn't have company for Christmas?

Rapp refilled the glass and sipped carefully, just bringing back the warmth, then stopping.

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Slowly he became aware of the carolers. At first he had to cock his head and listen intently. Yes, definitely singing—coming from down the street, growing more distinct. *Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to our newborn king.* Then: *O little town of Bethlehem . . .* Rapp hummed along. He was struck by a thought. There were no secular songs. *Could it be?*

He went to the front window and inched the drape aside. The group stood under the streetlight next door. Their breath rose in glittering plumes through the falling snow. They finished and trudged through the drifts to his house. Rapp saw a man and woman come down the walk from next door and hurry to catch up with the singers. The woman's arm was cocked up at the elbow, her mittened hand clutching something. An oval can.

Rapp threw back his head and laughed. He could see the can in perfect detail in his mind. Soft blue, and that torch. Dear Lord, he could almost smell it—the thin, pulpy scent of cardboard, slightly damp from the falling snow. His fingertip tingled with a memory of the oval of tin at the top of the can, that sharp edge where it tucked down inside.

Ingathering. Seventh-day Adventists.

Not Ad-vent-ists; Ad-ventists.

The group began singing again. Rapp heard the tramp of booted feet up the front steps. The doorbell buzzed, scraping the nerves of his stomach. He walked slowly to the door, anxious and vaguely angry, saying *be nice*, over and over to himself.

He opened the door and let them give the spiel, half-listening to the familiar words as the cold night air bit into his face and the carols flowed up and around him. He looked impatiently past the woman and man to the singers. Several middle-aged adults and seven or eight high school kids. The kids were probably from Takoma Academy. Good voices, young and sweet and clear.

“. . . and for our world efforts with the poor and needy,” the woman said. He

looked at her again. Her cheeks were flushed with the cold—her only makeup. “Any amount you can give would greatly help our work.”

Rapp looked at the can and almost smiled. There was the dollar bill sticking up for bait. No, a five! So inflation had hit Ingathering, too.

“When you help all these people, do you also try to convert them?” he asked.

The woman looked uncomfortable, and Rapp silently cursed himself. The man moved protectively closer to her. “Well, we do try to bring the gospel of Jesus to people, sir, but we help them whether they accept it or not.”

What could he say? *Yes, I'm a GS-14 with the U.S. Department of Religious Persecution; I'm taking notes on your activities. Or he could cackle wickedly and twist his mustache and say I'm a humanist—Boo!*

Rapp felt the anger creeping back. He thought of winos in a chapel, waiting stoically through the sermon while the soup heated up in the kitchen one room over. Men so chronically malnourished that they could hardly distinguish hunger any more. Their cells whimpering for food as they sat there on the hard pews. But if you gave them the soup first, they'd fall asleep during the sermon.

Fair is fair, Rapp thought bitterly. Everything has a price.

He remembered the NATO hitch—that time in the London tube when the scruffy guy sat against the subway wall playing Bach on his guitar. Such beautiful control of pitch and timbre, such precise, flowing rhythm. His guitar case had been open at his feet, sprinkled with 10- and 50-pence pieces. A lot of people just hurried past. You could listen free. But he'd given that guy a pound, and it had probably gone for drugs.

And the carols *were* beautiful.

Rapp pulled a five from his wallet and put

it in the can.

The woman gave him a beautiful smile. "Thank you, sir. Merry Christmas."

The carolers stayed put out front for almost 10 minutes, and he stood in the open doorway, nodding to the music and humming along. How long since he'd sung? Collegians, way back at Andrews? It seemed impossible. That was what happened when you left the church. You stopped getting furious and arguing mentally with the sermons. You stopped having to cringe while the Sabbath School leader and the visiting missionary and the head elder and finally the preacher tried to shake the last mite out of the congregation's pockets.

And you stopped singing.

Rapp stood in front of the fire. He picked up the Laphroaig and sipped and listened to the carolers recede down the street. He found himself in the dining room, with his ear pressed to the glass, to pick up the last of the sound.

Then he was in his jeep, rolling out the driveway. He followed the carolers, staying about 50 yards behind as they went around the block. He had to crack the plastic window to hear, and the cold seeped in, eating away at the feeble warmth of the jeep's heater. Each time he had to move to keep up, the crunch of snow under his wheels drowned out the singing. He kept his eyes hungrily on the group, watching them spread out between houses, then bunch up again. Two of the kids, a high school guy and girl, always stayed close to each other. Rapp felt warmed by them. They were young—no more than academy sophomores. The closeness was the guy's doing. He edged carefully toward the girl at each stop, always ending up with his arm just touching hers. She seemed unaware of him, giving her full attention to the lead caroler. The poor kid's dying to hold her hand, Rapp thought, grinning.

What am I doing out here?

You know what you're doing. You want to sing with them. You want to be with them.

Rapp realized that someone was standing beside his door—two of the adults from the group. They were leaning down to the window—they wanted to talk to him. He opened the door.

One of the men was his age and the other older. The older man spoke. "Is there something we can do for you?"

Rapp stared at him, uncomprehending. Do for him? Oh no, were they going to try to convert him now?

"We noticed you've been following the carolers," the man went on. His voice was polite, but the barest bit challenging, and then Rapp understood. The men were worried that he was up to some nefarious purpose. What could he say? *Yes, I'm a GS-14 with the U.S. Department of Religious Persecution. I'm taking notes on your activities. Or, I'm a worldly person looking for someone to influence. Or he could cackle wickedly and twist his mustache and say, I'm a humanist—Boo!*

Instead, he said, "Your singing is so beautiful, I just wanted to keep listening."

The man's face receded a few inches. Rapp saw a fleeting expression of distaste before a smile covered up. "Thank you, sir," the man said.

What's eating him? My breath—he smelled booze on my breath.

"Why don't you join us?" said the younger man.

Rapp saw the older man frown.

"No. Thanks, but I'd better not."

"Please. We'd love to have you."

Rapp curbed the jeep, cut the engine and got out. The older man stalked ahead, back to the group. The younger stayed with him, and Rapp saw that he was limping. Under the streetlight a distinctive pocking of scars stood out on his cheek. Shrapnel.

"You were a medic in 'Nam?" Rapp said.

The man looked at him in surprise. "Yes. And you used to be an Adventist, didn't you?"

Rapp almost stopped. How did this guy

know that? Ah—because he'd given him the two little clues. Who else would know that the guy must have been a medic instead of a combat soldier? And current Seventh-day Adventists did not have single malt scotch on their breath. Rapp smiled. "Touché" he said.

Then they were with the carolers.

It was wonderful. People said hello to him and smiled. He stood in the back and sang each remembered carol, picking up confidence and strength. The old pipes were still pretty good for a 37-year-old. Back in Collegians, Ferguson had always said that tenors didn't hit their stride until 40. Dear

He opened the door and let them give the spiel, half-listening to the familiar words as the cold night air bit into his face and the carols flowed up and around him.

Jesus, it felt so good to sing, to hear and feel your voice coming out, blending with the rest, strong and clear. To get the appreciative looks from the others in the band, and feel proud—and warm, even though your nose hairs were beginning to crackle and your toes to go numb. The sky was black, the houses looked warm and safe, roofed in snow, molten gold at the windows pouring out when the doors opened.

Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king.

Rapp remembered all those times he'd gone caroling at Andrews Academy just to

be near Sharon Ann DeVries. She never even knew he existed. But he would sing for her, and his face would be warm with adoration—for her, for the soft and silent dreamland of snow-muffled houses and trees, for the black velvet sky and snowflakes glittering like mica in the streetlights. God was up there somewhere in those days. It was a thrill to work for him, while gazing covertly upon his most splendid creation: the sweet, virtuous, and unattainable Sharon Ann.

Rapp saw the boy take the girl's hand at last, mitten against mitten. She let him hold it, and Rapp felt tears springing to his eyes.

Rapp left them as they closed their route back at their schoolbus. The blue can with the torch had filled up. They'd made a big haul. He turned down the offer of hot cocoa in the church basement and watched them clump into the old yellow bus with Takoma Academy written on the side. They waved at him through the windows and he stood waving back until the glass fogged over, graying out their faces.

By the time Rapp got back to his chair in front of the fireplace, it was almost 11:30 p.m. The fire had died to embers. His throat felt pleasantly furry and he knew he'd be hoarse tomorrow. His toes were wet and numb. He stirred up the fire and put another log on.

He closed his eyes and saw the two mittened hands clinging together. He poured a fresh glass and raised it in a toast—to the two kids, and to the scarred medic who'd formed the bridge. How about the stern fellow with the nose for booze? Rapp gave a tolerant chuckle. Yes, him too.

"To my old friends," he murmured.